Multiculturalism and solution-focused psychotherapy: an exploration of the nonexpert role
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Orientalism is described as the 'grandest of all narratives' (Edward Said, 1978)

Zai sheng luoh zhong, mei li de xiao, you ya de chou (In life, beautifully smile, gracefully worry) (From Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 153)

The role of the solution-focused psychotherapist (SFP) is less about confirming the rights of the client as an individual and more about amplifying their preferred social performance. The client, the therapist and the drama of therapy represent the object of this performance in which cultural meaning is simply amplified. The identity of the client is framed within multicultural narratives and discourse with which the psychotherapist grapples and strives to maintain a type of neutrality and equality, a relationship of non-expertness. It is the client who has the resources and who is expert in their own lives. Yet, the drama conflict is one in which the client expects certain answers, reassurances and direction. This article is an exploration of issues related to counselling technologies, language and culture on the solution-focused notion of nonexpert practice.

Keywords: solution-focused practice; multiculturalism; psychotherapy theory

Background and aims
This article discusses complex concepts and is therefore very different from the usual attempt of solution-focused psychotherapy (SFP) to make psychotherapy accessible, engaging and simplistic. Having acknowledged this, it serves to remind us that even the seemingly obvious issues in everyday clinical practice have scope for further debate. This article aims to explore the issue of nonexpertness within the realms of multicultural SFP. Solution-focused psychotherapy uses a post-structural lens through which to de-centre the ‘actor’ (the terms ‘actor’ and ‘performance’ are used to signify the contentious and arguable notion of an authentic essentialised autonomous self) as the dominant site of multicultural praxis and ask what happens between actors, not necessarily to the actors, in the therapy room? What is the significance of culture for such performance, particularly when considering how the wider sociological rituals associated with multiculturalism can be intrinsically interwoven by the fabric of psychotherapeutic cultures and interact in such a manner as to play out and ‘do’ particular multiculturally defined courses of action, scripts

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and narratives? Are therapists and the conditions in which they are constituted preserving the old historical one-up-manship expert models similar to the traditional doctor–patient relationship? Do therapists ‘act’ nonexpert, rather than truly attempt to achieve nonexpert practice as a real therapeutic possibility?

Introduction

This article forms part of an ongoing exploration by the authors to establish the theoretical paradigm of solution focused practice/psychotherapy. The SFP approach is now heading towards its thirtieth birthday (de Shazer, 1985) yet it is often wrongly defined as a quick fix approach or a gimmicky and fashionable collection of skills. Skills such as the miracle question, scaling and seeking strengths form the bedrock of SFP, but have also detracted from the fact SFP is guided and founded on complex philosophy and theoretical foundations that differ from other psychotherapeutic approaches. The constructionist and systemic theory upon which SFP is founded emphasizes the central idea that people are subjects and constituted by their relationships with other objects. This is different from the essentialist driven humanism, biological determinism and ethical universalism associated with other more person-centred and psychodynamic approaches. The notion of nonexpert practice is therefore one promoting the idea that the client has resources and personal strengths to solve their own problems (Macdonald, 2011, 2007; O'Connell, 2001), a belief that individuals are expert in their own lives and wider systems (de Shazer, 1985) and that language defines perception of authorship (de Shazer, 1994; White & Epston, 1990). Therefore, the very personal identity minefield known as multiculturalism provides a more than adequate backdrop for exploring the ‘doing’ of solution-focused (SF) nonexpertness.

Re-thinking multiculturalism and SF philosophy

The notion of multiculturalism can be explosive and divisive because it is not necessarily the demonstration of skills that distinguishes SFP as being culturally responsive and responsible, but rather its connection with the awkward and often misrepresented post-structural and constructionist philosophy that became popular during the second half of the twentieth century. This philosophy offers an approach for analysing metaphysical theory and emphasizes the constituting and positioning power of language, hidden yet powerful social structural discourses and the systemic interconnection between cultural objects (including human subjects). This focusing on metaphysical rather than analytical philosophy offered the authors a means to expand their thinking about how subjects and objects utilize power, subject positioning (notions of expertise), multicultural identity and narratives about the self in the engagement of therapeutic activities between SF therapists and their clients. Recently the authors (Holyoake & Golding, 2010) contemplated the core issue of essentialism and ‘the self’ and concluded that SFP differs from other psychotherapy because of its denial of the essentialized autonomous individual. This, in addition to the philosophical concerns listed in Table 1, points up that issues to do with identity and multiculturalism pose specific challenges for the practitioner wishing to demonstrate nonexpert practice.

The attempt to re-think some of the core theoretical issues central to SFP has helped the authors to subsequently develop the theoretic themes in Table 1 and as a result provide in this article some considerations related to how SF theory and SF practitioners might go about considering and amplifying multiculturalism-related ideas. In addition,
Table 1. Principles of solution-focused theory.

- Relativism (the client experiences the world as relative; the client has strengths, is the expert who has personal resources.)
- Anti-essentialism (limited emphasis on personal history, more of the here and now, less reliance on perceived and fixed essential qualities of existence.)
- Antifoundationalism (no emphasis on establishing past or cause of problem, rather, emphasis on change, skeleton keys and change-oriented questions)
- Anti-universal (links to relative philosophy and emphasis on multiple voices, stories and possibilities)
- System-orientated (highlighting the culturally situated subject positioning of lived and memory experience)
- Acknowledge the impact of language (binary opposition and difference; language is not neutral, but rather constitutes, constructs and determines experienced reality; without difference there is no meaning, and binary allows for the identification of exceptions)
- Emphasis on constructionist rather than constructivist (SF philosophy is concerned just as much with the social world as well as the intra-psyche or constructivist psychology of the individual (subject)
- Agency vs determinism (a realization of the determining effect of language and systemic discourse on the subject as opposed to the assumed agency and freedom associated with most humanist person-centred approaches; thus, the emphasis on ‘what can be seen’ – what would be the first difference you’d notice? – and the inseparable nature of the social relationships between actors – who’d be the first to notice the difference?)
- Emphasis on the collective narrative of experience (the impact of the gaze of others is emphasized and amplified)
- Personal historicism (relativistic notion of experienced self as a narrative; people are subjects in systems, collective narratives and discourses of language as opposed to essentialized, autonomous and free-thinking individuals)
- The cultural object/subject as both absent and present (SF emphasizes not needing to know the problem in order to seek a solution; in SF deep analysis of the absent is ignored in favour of that which can be ‘seen’ and changed (the present); the metaphysical and metaphorical circularity of language determines that presence is determined by that which is absent in the system)
- Future-focused (emphasizing the past validates foundationalism and universalism and therefore determines a fixed experience of selfhood and ahistorical positioning of the client)
- (American) Pragmatism (if it works, do more, if it does not do something different, it does not need to be complex even if it is!)
- Power grand narratives (a theoretical recognition that language constructs and determines our thoughts/existence; narratives circulate and offer the miracle of doing and noticing something different)
- Organicism as opposed to atomic (less of a reliance on scientific outcomes and physics in favour of the metaphysical assumptions ‘of doing what works’ even if we do not know how or why)
- Synchronie (a historical) analysis ‘what is happening here?’ (less emphasis on history and past in favour of synchronised connections)
- Ethics (nonontological or utilitarian or humanist ideals of freedom and growth, but aligned with ideas of ‘the social contract’ and dependency on community and bio-determinism)

one of the side effects of this theorizing has been the attempt of the authors to also re-think appropriate questions related to defining and locating how SFP establishes itself as an identifiable entity with a core (and identity of its own) distinct from other therapy theory and approaches. Although this is not the main concern of this article, it remains a point of contention through association with the impact it has on how therapists conduct themselves and negotiate interaction interpersonally during therapy sessions. What are the ways in which multicultural narratives and SFP relate to the three theoretical themes of subject positioning, language and experimmess? How does an analysis of this allow us to re-consider the impact of multiple cultures and multiculturalism on SFP?
Underpinning SF philosophy and multiculturalism

The development of SF philosophy has a historical and contextual association with culture. That is, it belongs to a specific time and is unequivocally connected to ideas that dominated the theoretical and cultural horizons of the early and mid 1980s. At the time, Europe was witnessing, relinquishing and coming to terms with the post-colonial territorial-driven concerns of a previous generation of empire builders. The world had settled into a long Cold War and the USA was still struggling to come to terms with civil rights issues of its own. It was becoming clear that new methods for understanding cultures and society were being utilized out of necessity, experimented with and even politically driven. These included the development of European structural and post-structural philosophies, which at the time made little challenge to the dominance and modernist universal aspirations of humanism, cognitivism and behaviourism. However, 30 years on in this new post-modern era of uncertainty, cyberspace, flux and a move from the century of the brain, there is among social scientists and some psychologists an increasing belief that the loosely defined paradigm of constructionism of which structural and post-structural philosophy are said to belong offers a new and fresh way of thinking about issues such as relating to selfhood (subject positioning) as well as the power of language and the notion of expertness (epistemological certainty).

It can be seen in Table 1 that there are many theoretical assumptions related to SF practice. Although at first glance these may appear distant, irrelevant and meaningless to the practice of the everyday practitioner, these theory are the building blocks for everything that makes SF distinctive from other therapy approaches and bring to the fore the importance of culture and multiculturalism. The rethinking of subject positioning, language and expertness is relevant in relation to actual SF practice. Using the classic work of French philosophers such as Foucault (1966/1973, 1973/1975) and his work on the gaze and personal technologies, it is possible to reconsider the way in which hidden discourses structure not only the language with which we think, but also the way both therapists and clients are expected to conform to particular cultural expectations. Therapists behave under the surveillance of ‘the gaze’ and thus are ‘positioned’ in the technologies of the counselling relationship. They are positioned in a more powerful position from which many clients will assume and expect expert opinion. Likewise, the work of Derrida (1976) on logo-centricity and deconstruction allows for a re-thinking of how therapy is understood in terms of difference and privileged knowledge. It is perceived that the therapist will know ‘what to do’ and ‘have the expert answers’ that effect the dynamic of the therapeutic performance. This relates to the ‘process over outcome’ preference in Table 1 and binary opposites.

Similarly, Lacan’s (1973/1990) notion of structural language illustrates the possibilities of structured binaries in therapeutic thought. For example, the way clients might simply want a firm diagnosis and something signifying cultural norms poses many theoretical difficulties for a SF practitioner wanting to at least appear nonexpert or validating the existence of reality outside of language. Baudrillard (1981/1994) and his work on hyper-reality and simulation highlights some of these difficulties, which can be related to the ideas of multivoice and collective narratives (see Table 1). Modernist essentialism tends to privilege a single and universal appreciation of reality and experience. This would encompass and include efforts to categories and create distinct cultural markers and norms. For the SF practitioner, there are multiple possibilities (O’Connell, 2001) and therefore less certainty and less expertness.

It can be seen that the major concerns for these thinkers relate to alternative concepts to those offered up by the positivist and analytical philosophy underpinning other psychotherapeutic approaches. The work of Barker and Galasinski (2001) shows how such
metaphysical thinking enables imaginary, confused and aesthetic fascination as opposed to certainty. A type of theoretical violence is credited to philosophers like Lyotard (1988), violent because, as with the emergence of SF and most other approaches, it is a reaction against that which went before. Similarly, most models of multiculturalism have been reactions against that which preceded; such is the nature of academic theorizing. Yet, for the SF practitioner as for the multicultural campaigner, the argument for the distinct lack of personal autonomy, individuality, trustworthy language and a certain reality obviously has a destabilizing effect, and as such, seems to place SF on what Watson and Jowers (1997, p 174) describe as ‘the other-side of signification’.

The other side of signification – multicultural key themes

Solution-focused psychotherapy is a result and a product of its cultural positioning. The same can be said of our perceptions of multiculturalism in psychotherapy. In the same way that clients and therapist are positioned in roles, routines and narrative identities, it is possible to deconstruct and begin to unpack a post-structural analysis of what is meant by culture, multiculturalism and the impact of power on the dynamic drama of therapy. The notion of signification allows for this, because it assumes that all knowledge about the world is referent, arbitrary and therefore mediated through a person’s relationship with the world (it is relative, see Table 1). The world is relative and makes sense through a process of objects signifying meaning in relation to other objects in the system. In short, an analysis of signification offers an opportunity to re-think key ideas about multiculturalism and its relationship with SF. The pioneering work of de Shazer (1994, 1991) emphasizes the importance of signification in the way SF practitioners are encouraged to consider the ‘text-focused’, as opposed to the ‘reader-focused’, technicalities of language in therapy sessions. In the same way that Barthes (1974) concluded the ‘death of the author’, the SF practitioner amplifies the strengths of the client as the main source in their cultural storytelling. This theory, however, would emphasize that, when a client talks, it is the culture that speaks and not them as individuals. Thus, reminding us that there are contentious ideas and theoretical differences related to how culture for SF philosophy is seen to speak through social subjects because the story can be different with every re-read. There are no expert universals or pre-conceived foundations.

Likewise, O’Connell (2001, p. 14) notes the relativism underpinning the SF approach, which is more about ‘acknowledging and validating’ rather than the ‘empathy’ so prized by other approaches. The interpersonal validation made from empathy is replaced by a future-focused pragmatism so often mistaken for gimmicky checklist skills. Yet, for the authors this is a payoff in an attempt to perform nonexpertness. Selkman (1997, p. 7) argues that the main ‘expertise as therapists should be in eliciting the clients’ expertise’. Such signification is pointed up in the later work of Sharry (2007, p. 9), who states specifically that SF reconnects to ‘the resources that exist within their lives’, not within themselves (reminding us of personal historicism and a constituting connection with multiculturalism; see Table 1). It is on these key SF issues of subject positioning and the technicalities of language that this article will now focus.

Subject/object positioning – performance anxiety and aesthetics

Dominant current sociological theory, including multiculturalism, is framed within Western liberal pluralism. This particular theoretical orientation favours behaviourism, rationalism and individualism, and promotes the notion of universal foundationalism, in
short, the idea that individuals exist independently of the world, and have free will and the rationality to think and act independently. Thus the notion of having control and a position of expertness, as well as a cultural identity that should be respected appears to be perfectly plausible and therefore beyond the ideal that reflects the over-riding concern of most multiculturalists principles. The primary ideal for most psychotherapy is a performance that emphasizes a respect for the cultural identity of the individual. As noted by Blumler and Gurevitch, (1995, cited in Hesmondhalgh, 2007, p. 32), a ‘crisis of civic communication’ allows for the idea that psychotherapy somehow substantiates and reinforces traditional ideas we have about multiculturalism and thus undermines any attempt by the therapist to demonstrate nonexpertness. The best hope for the SF practitioner is providing a therapeutic space for sustaining participatory citizenship within the therapy room that reflects a similar sustaining in society.

A denial of the pandering to politically correct views of multiculturalism brings with it a number of theoretical difficulties and considerations. The old yet stubbornly lazy effect of liberal pluralism on multiculturalism has been to produce the idea that ‘nice forward-thinking’ cultures offer an equal playing ground regarding the issues of power and social justice (while neglecting other issues as less important). In addition, it puts up functionalist propositions that the observation and measurement of the individual is the model through which (and not wishing to overuse Frankfurt School terminology; Althusser, 1968/1975; Habermas, 1987) the apparatus and ‘structures’ of society such as the media, economy, law and education (once again neglecting the more subtle and direct interpersonal impact of simply being/doing social) transform the normative models of democracy. Even with the addition of holism and hints of humanism, the softness of this grand modernist project is fast becoming redundant in an age where SF practitioners and world citizens are becoming increasingly aware of the important aspirations of the complex and layered relative nature of identity politics. Give the customer, the consumer, the client, the hope and a witness with whom to write their story and promise nothing more. Thus, the increasing concern of SFP to provide opportunities for clients to explore their relative narratives and aesthetic personal notions of multiple story possibilities (as opposed to single situated and geographically located identities) is feasible, yet confined by the performance expectations enforced within the wider psychotherapeutic discourse.

Similarly, the notion of the aesthetic as an issue of subject positioning (or identity) is something Foster (1985) highlighted over 25 years ago as being a significant consideration for post-modern thinking. For the average SF practitioner this translates into recognition of liberal pluralism’s failure to provide an all-encompassing framework of selfhood and multiculturalism. For example, when expressing the aesthetic of cultural identity, people tend to identify with ethnic narratives of geography and physical selfhood as opposed to other personal self-defining attributes. Next, the aesthetic qualities of connection and kinship may surface and lead into the objectification of their behaviour, and finally, the multiplicity of meaning in the representation of their cultural performance. In the last 25 years it has become more noticeable that the aesthetic that Foster and other postmodern thinkers (Morzall, 2008; Featherstone, 2007; Sassatelli, 2007; Young, 2007; Bryman, 2006; McLeod, 2003) articulate is hard to control and police in terms of its meaning and consumption. Therefore in practice the established therapy approaches with their emphasis on autonomy, individual free will, cognitive logical rationalism, equity in citizenship, progressivist utopian humanism, educational ethos and advocacy are, like a museum without walls, clinging to the hidden discourses of authority and power that sneakily undermine both the nonexpert and the multicultural message.

Thus, subject positioning and multiculturalism for the SF practitioner concerns the relational as opposed to the physical. The SF practitioner relates towards the object rather
than to it, because the organism as opposed to atomic philosophy (see Table 1) dictates that every object, as with every subject, like an iceberg has equal hidden relational dynamics that connect it to all other objects in the system. The absent or hidden part of this aesthetic symbolism for the SF practitioner is that multiculturalism in the main part focuses on ‘the body’, therefore at the expense of other meta-physical dynamics (e.g. the performance and previously mentioned objectification of behaviour and technologies of the self). The modernist preoccupation with outcome control, freedom and autonomy, the body and assessing the worth of the individual has led to a space and state in psychotherapy where the ‘worth’ of the therapist is dependant on the success of the client, or more specifically the client’s bodily performance.

Like Heidegger’s Dasein (1962) with a twist of witnessing and validation, there is no separation of existing from the world and the body is not something distinct from the mind in SF philosophy. There is no inside where ‘feelings’ reside, but rather just subject positioning that is constituted and inseparable from the conditions of construction (i.e. the visible and hidden relational dynamics). Therefore, without wishing to be side-tracked into other important theoretical considerations, this emphasizes that for SF practitioners the identity of the approach is about skills, but just as much about theory. How someone feels about their sense of multicultural selfhood and how therapists demonstrate nonexpertness concern the meanings associated with cultural objects, relationships and performance as much as autonomy, the individual and identity politics.

Language and expertise

In their research and practice, both authors have reflected on how language (culture) creates identities in the therapy room, in particular, the way in which particular expectations substantiate and sustain notions of expertise. Multiculturalism provides a fertile arena for this because both therapists and clients spend much effort on attempting to secure a sense of who they are. The related theoretical questions are: how does language impact on the sense of self for many clients? How are others responsible for their sense of self? In what ways can psychotherapy genuinely allow an individual to detach from the emergent multicultural discourse? It can be seen in Table 2 that these questions borrow from more substantive theoretical discussion into the world of language. The authors borrowed from the work of Municas (2006, p. 92), in that these questions and theory are the mechanisms for much future work and continue the work of O’Hanlon and Beadle (1997) in serving to emphasize the more narrative nature of SF practice, which also enables the client to work with any number of possibilities.

The early work of Pierre Bourdieu (1968/1970) emphasizes the complex and obvious relationships between language and social power. Could it be the case that for the SF practitioner the reluctance in practice to emphasize the past, the ethnic and essentially personal is a reflection not only on the underlying collection of ‘anti’ theory from which the approach is founded (antifoundationalism, antiessentialism and relativism), but also an attempt to be politically and multiculturally correct? For the authors need to at least appear

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multicultural in a shrinking world of national borders, and ever growing cultural narratives appear to be far more important than the actuality of being multicultural. The letter gets lost in the post in favour of political correctness, so to speak. For SF practitioners the political emphasis of multiculturalism on equality, justice and access not only negates the harsh experiences of the real world and therefore the validity of people's stories, but also collapses the interface of distinction (Morrall, 2008; Derrida, 1976). It is with the idea of distinction and 'difference' that the post-structural foundations of the SF approach encourage nonexpert practitioners to seek exceptions, search with scaling questions and wonder about miracles.

Therefore, multiculturalism more than influences the practice of mainstream SF practice at precisely the point where the expertise of the therapist consumes the nonexpertise of the client, where an understanding and renegotiating of the values, ideas and beliefs of the client become integral parts of the solution or, alternatively, the maze and labyrinth of language used to couch a justification of the approach and validation of personal experience (Sassatelli, 2007). The psychotherapist is always doing more than simply empathizing with the client from the standpoint of bringing a set of predefined analytical explanations. The SF psychotherapist embarks on a validating journey with the client that is theoretically driven by a witnessing of that said journey. This is something akin to what Gardner and Harper (2000) might term intervention, or something more than a façade of cosmopolitan or masquerading to a point where it sometimes appears little more than a parody of expertness. It is a space where both the would-be therapist and would-be client have to actually negotiate distinction by concentrating less on the terminology of psychology and aiming to make room for a discourse to develop between two nonexperts.

In the attempt to represent this development in multiculturalism (as with other politically correct actions such as anti-ageism, gender awareness and equity), for those experiencing physical challenges it can be seen how psychotherapy is inescapably interwoven in the language and expert models of wider social discourse. The world of psychotherapy is principally concerned with the idea of nonexpertness (at least in principle), which is a co-operative approach not entirely dissimilar to the concept of mutuality. At the practical level, this allows for the possibility of practitioners heeding the personal geographies of multiculturalism, the terrains of everyday life that are seen to be different without prejudice (Chouliaraki, 2006). The narrative witnessing offers multiculturalism as a categorically reality, with iconic meaning. Multiculturalism can be seen as a multimodal narrative that emphasizes conditional agency which can bring out a thesis of compassion fatigue in therapists. Using the work of Chouliaraki (2006, p. 112), it is possible to see how therapists publically acknowledge the importance of multiculturalism, yet experience fatigue at the pessimistic role 'concerning the ethical role'. As noted by Chouliaraki (2006, p. 122), this raises the notion of 'cosmopolitan spectator'. It is distinction that gives identity. For both authors there is a new burgeoning understanding that it is in fact the revealing and 'witnessing' for the SF practitioner that enables them to adopt a nonexpert stance in the face of ethically charged and morally expected courage.

Conclusion – witnessing the identity of the object

If SFP is the therapy outcome of post-modernism, is it able to do what modernism could not and deal with diversity of culture and selfhood? Modernism relied on the pretence of scientific progress and the allure of universal all-encompassing historical frameworks as the basis of identity and ethical psychotherapeutic practice. As a tried and well-worn field of academic inquiry, the topic of identity still remains at the forefront of multiculturalism and
how therapists should behave in its presence. The topic allows for many spirited debates, discussions and avenues along which the under-published academic can traverse. However, having made this acknowledgement, this is not to say that therapy *per se* has not sought to provide a ‘third space’ as in Bhabha’s (1994) ‘hybridity’, which is about displacing the universal power structure of authority. Perhaps it is even similar to Erickson’s notion of ‘awakening and disengagement’ in emphasizing the disengagement of the client from the problem (Haley, 1997, p. 16). This resemblance to the key phrases of SF practice in attempting to be nonexpert through the sentiment of witnessing reflects the idea that nothing happens in isolation as with the ‘doing of the problem’ (O’Hanlon, 1999). Objects exist only within systems reinforced by narratives of multiculturalism, which in the therapy room may be about ‘continuity’ in the historical and personal identity sense.

The nature of the object is one which is studied as detached from purposeful existence. That is, all meaning is nothing more than an object (including people *per se*, thoughts about people, actions of people, memories of people and everything that can in all actuality be thought), which materialistically exists in nothing more than its relationship to other objects in systems. As far out and irrelevant as this theory may at first appear, the notion of the object as nothing more than cultural and constructed and able to be witnessed is the key to demonstrating the multicultural façade in SF practice, because who is to say that the witness does anything more except validate the process between two objects in a system? The simple act of witnessing (as with using any other psychotherapeutic model) does not equate to increasing any degree of truth. Rather, it simply emphasizes that at any one time all objects (cultural meanings) are made sense of through mediation and in a constant state of presence and absence. These largely hidden structures determine meaning and thus our understanding of what we perceive to be actual. Even the notion of multicultural identity is simulation and for the SF practitioner best understood through the process of witnessing the service-user’s story, in particular, the fragments associated with power, indoctrinated naivety, notions of mimicking identities, parody, observing, representing and the impression of identity and the collapse of distinction. Thus, SFP as observed in this discussion has a number of key philosophical issues to contend with in the coming years, issues that ultimately rest upon notions of expertness, identity and positioning in the world of therapy.

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