

## **Message from Gale Miller\* to EBTA Conference Sofia 2018 Participants.**

First, I want to thank the organizers for inviting me to participate in your conference. I would prefer to be in Sofia in person but that is not possible. The organizers have suggested that I address the organizing questions for the conference. The questions are relevant, challenging and call for many insights that I do not possess. I find that in this situation, it is best to steal someone else's ideas and use them as if they are my own. Here goes.

The French sociologist of science Bruno Latour (2006) tells us that roughly 20 years ago he visited the Natural History Museum in New York City. On the top floor, he found an exhibit dealing with the history of horses. He was intrigued by how the exhibit consisted of two parts. One part showed the evolution of horses by arranging fossils from horses' earliest known presence on earth to today. The other part showed the evolution of scientists' interpretations of how horses have evolved. Being a good social constructionist, Professor Latour was initially interested in the relationship between the fossils and scientists' interpretations of them. He notes that the general trend in scientific thought is that horses are moving from being small animals with three toes and short teeth to being large animals with one toe and long teeth. He agrees that this is the general trend of horse evolution.

Latour adds, however, that there is great variation within this general trend. Even as most horses evolved in the typical way, we see fossils from the 20th century of smaller horses having three toes and short teeth. The history of horses as told by fossils is much more complex than that told in linear depictions of this process. Latour then turns to scientists' interpretations of the fossils' meaning. Here, too, he discovers that if we look closely at scientists' representations we

find significant variation in interpretation, including scientists who question whether they can say anything for sure about the evolution of horses. Latour (p. 4) states that

the whole floor is punctuated by videos of scientists at work, little biographies of famous fossil-hunters at war with one another, with even different reconstructions of skeletons to prove to the public that “we don’t know for sure” ....

The two parts of the exhibit show that while scientists’ interpretations of the evolution of horses are connected to discoveries unearthed by archaeologists, the interpretations are more than simple reports on these discoveries. Scientists’ interpretations are also related to their decisions about where to look for horse fossils, how they date fossils, the ways in which they assemble pieces of horse fossils into representations of horses, and prevailing assumptions about the proper scientific study of horses. These and other aspects of scientists’ orientations to horse evolution justify their practice of minimizing the scientific significance of the existence of three toed horses during times when most horses had one toe.

The exhibit observed by Latour makes visible the complex and largely invisible conditions associated with our knowledge of the history of horses. Latour’s example makes me wonder, “How might scientists respond to the discovery of a herd of living small three toed horses with long teeth, perhaps somewhere near Sofia?” Would they treat the horses as an interesting oddity that is irrelevant to their scientific knowledge? Would they even count them as real horses? I can imagine some scientists declaring that the overwhelming evidence provided by the fossils they have collected show that the category of horse applies only to horses that were once small, three toed and had short teeth and today are large, one toed and have long teeth. They might add that

the newly discovered herd of animals represents a distinctive group that should not be called horses.

Others might say that the newly discovered horses show that scientists need to reconsider how they have measured and interpreted the teeth of ancient horses. Might some of them be interpreted as having longer teeth than others? If so, then the newly discovered horses might be classified as a distinctive variation within the evolution of horses. I can imagine a third group of scientists insisting that the newly discovered herd foretells the evolutionary future of horses. If we could only live long enough, we would see that most horses in the future will be small, have three toes and long teeth. If the latter scientists are correct, defining three toed horses with long teeth as not real horses prematurely declares the end of the evolution of the horse.

I am sure that my point is obvious. We cannot separate our interpretations of the past from our responses to future developments. We imagine solution-focused futures by assuming that some aspects of the past will endure, and we reconstruct events of the past by imagining new futures. I am quite sure that something like small three toed horses with long teeth exists in the solution-focused world. One reason we don't notice them is because they don't attend a lot of professional conferences, but that could change. If you meet one please remember that when three toed horses with long teeth feel disrespected, they bite. I now turn to how Latour's story might be useful in addressing some of the issues organizing the conference. My purpose is to consider how solution-focused thinkers and practitioners might avoid getting bitten by a small three toed horse with long teeth.

I have no idea what the future will entail but I do think that there are some aspects of solution-focused thought and practice that are particularly promising sites for glimpsing change.

One of these sites involves solution-focused practitioners' techniques, which I see as loosely similar to the toes and teeth of horses. The evolution of horses is a history of changing environments to which horses slowly adapt. This lesson is easily forgotten when it comes to changes in solution-focused practitioners' and other people's practices. Too often, advocates of new techniques over emphasize how their practices derive from so-called solution-focused principles and under state how their interactions with clients are contexts of invention.

I think a useful response to a new technique is to ask, "How did that practitioner's clients teach her or him to do that?" A related question involves the shifting professional environments in which solution-focused practitioners work and adapt. These questions are also a basis for challenging the dismissal of abandoned past techniques as no longer relevant to solution-focused practice. Treating any past practice as no longer relevant is risky for anyone who works in environments that you do not fully control. The future sometimes hides in remnants of past assumptions and practices that are marginalized in popular interpretations of the moment. Clients can be very skills at revealing these futures

This brings me back to those small three toed horses with long teeth that don't attend professional conferences. It is worth asking, "Who are they, what do their clients want from them, how do they address their clients' desires and needs, how are their work environments similar to and different than those of other solution-focused practitioners, and how did they acquire their solution-focused skills and knowledge?" Equally important, "What needs to happen to get them to attend solution-focused conferences and share their experiences?" For me, these questions direct attention to how successful established professional groups sometimes inadvertently that undercut their ability to adapt to the future.

I conclude by drawing some overly simple lessons from Latour's story about the evolution of horses. First, be willing to imaginatively reinterpret official versions of the solution-focused past. Consider how revered texts, dominant histories and typical training methods might be recast to construct new insights and practices that might better fit with your work circumstances. This is not heresy. It is basic to how solution-focused thought and practice were created in the first place. I know that solution-focused practitioners like to say that you should not try to fix a problem that doesn't exist, but that claim was made in discussing clients' situations. It does not accurately capture the attitude of the therapists at the Brief Family Therapy Center in Milwaukee who invented solution-focused brief therapy or the work of current innovators.

Second, look for small three toed horses with long teeth, not red herrings. Red herrings are stuck in the past and present. There is no future in that. Third, keep interacting with one another. This is the most important lesson of Latour's story for me. Scientists' continuously disagree about how to study horse fossils and what they have learned from the fossils, while recognizing that what really matters is keeping the conversation going. They recognize that without serious conversation there is no evolution. Finally, invite a three toed horse with long teeth to next year's conference.

Latour, Bruno. 2006. "A Textbook Case Revisited - Knowledge as Mode of Existence." in *The Handbook of Science and Technology Studies*, vol. 83-112, edited by E. J. Hackett, O. Amsterdamska, M. E. Lynch, and J. Wajam. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

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