

Reviews

RESEARCH REVIEWS

Peter Szabó

Anthony M. Grant (2012)

Journal of Systemic Therapies, Vol. 31, No.2, pp. 21–35

Making a positive change: a randomized study comparing solution-focused vs. problem-focused coaching questions

Compilation from the abstract:

This study compared the effects of problem-focused and SF coaching questions on positive and negative affect, self-efficacy, goal approach and action planning. All 225 participants described a real life problem they wanted to solve. Half of them were asked SF questions in their coaching, the other half problem-focused questions. Both groups effectively enhanced their goal approach. However, the SF group had significantly greater increase in their goal approach. Problem-focused questions did not impact on positive or negative affect or self-efficacy. In contrast, the SF approach significantly increased positive affect, decreased negative affect and increased self-efficacy. In addition, the solution-focused group generated significantly more action steps to help them reach their goal.

Implications for practice:

Finally we have some evidence-based data concerning the field of coaching and supporting the claim that our SF questions do have a useful influence. I am particularly pleased about the result of increased self-efficacy (the belief in our capabilities to take action and manage future situations), which seems to be a reliable predictor for actually reaching the goal. The increase of self-efficacy was over five times higher in the SF group.

In his study Anthony Grant concludes that there remains still a lot to learn about what constitutes effective SF practice.

Some of the missing learning is now being explored by the series of studies presented below. Microanalysis offers a radically different perspective of what happens in communication. It is not about asking the “right” questions to produce information about what is in the head of the client. This other perspective rather explores the co-constructive nature of conversations. If therapeutic conversations shape both the information and the meanings that emerge during a conversation, then microanalysis offers a close moment-to-moment look at how this happens in effective practice and provides evidence of how therapists contribute to this co-construction of information and meaning.

Peter De Jong, Janet Beavin Bavelas, Harry Korman (2013)
Journal of Systemic Therapies, Vol. 32, No.3, pp. 17-73

**An introduction to using Microanalysis to observe
Co-construction in Psychotherapy (pp. 17-30):**

Implications for the training of coaches:

Looking back at my practice of training coaches, it seems as if for 15 years I had put the main emphasis on asking the ‘right’ SF questions. I am starting to realise how much more of co-constructing influence happens in coaching conversations beyond asking questions.

I remember a first hint from Steve de Shazer in this direction when in 2000 at a workshop in Switzerland he suggested looking not only at the conversation sequence of ‘practitioner question – client answer’ but also developing interest in the sequence of ‘client answer – practitioner reaction’.

The findings of De Jong, Beavin Bavelas and Korman provide a simple framework for this extended perspective of what is going on in the conversation. What we do beyond asking can be described as process of ‘listen – select – build’. The research is pointed at finding out more about how we co-construct the conversation in this with these three elements.

How we listen to the client's utterings and what we select, omit or add proves to influence what story the client is telling.

For the 'build' part the researchers explore three building blocks therapists use which seem to influence the direction in which the conversation is going and the version of the client's life that is emerging: therapist's questions, therapist's formulations, therapist's lexical choices. Between these building blocks, client and therapist use grounding processes as a kind of cement and overarching mechanism to agree upon what has been mutually established in the conversation.

By using this framework of description, trainers gain a lot more possibilities to reinforce practitioners in all the different useful details of how they contribute, and practitioners discover more options in practising how to be useful when utilising language as the main means of our change work.

Following the introduction there are three more articles from the authors and others looking at microanalysis and presenting first findings:

Microanalysis of Formulations in Solution-Focused Brief Therapy, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Motivational Interviewing (pp. 31–45):

Comparing different therapeutic approaches in responding to client utterings, SF practitioners preserved a significantly higher proportion of the client's exact words and added significantly fewer of the therapist's own interpretations.

Microanalysis of Positive and Negative content in SFBT and CBT Expert Sessions (pp. 46–59):

As expected, positive content was significantly higher and negative content was significantly lower in SFBT compared to CBT. Even more interestingly, there was a significant tendency for clients to respond in kind (negative therapist content was followed by negative client content and positive therapist content by positive client content).

Identifying Solution-Building Formulations Through Microanalysis (pp. 60–73):

The step by step microanalysis of formulations by three SFBT experts demonstrates how practitioners can use their formulations as an essential component of co-construction in practice, training or supervision.

The research team is planning to look more closely specifically into coaching conversations in the near future.

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