

Research findings support the therapeutic value of empowering clients by asking them questions that presuppose personal agency

One of the most cherished beliefs of solution-focused and strengths-based therapists is that clients should be given credit for their improvements, changes and accomplishments. Therefore we ask “How did you do that?” or “Are you aware of how you pulled that through?” whenever we identify and discuss client improvements. We believe that when clients identify how they made an improvement happen they will be in a better position to do more of it and will also be better equipped to deal with possible slips or relapses. But, from the research point of view, does this hold true?

In a study on cognitive-behavioral therapy conducted by Mark Powers and his team, the authors examined the effect of attributional processes on return of fear following exposure-based treatment. 95 participants with severe claustrophobic fear were randomly allocated to a waitlist condition, a psychological placebo condition, an empirically supported 1-session exposure-based treatment, or the same exposure treatment given in conjunction with an inactive pill. Attributions concerning medication taking were manipulated by randomly assigning participants in the exposure-based treatment plus pill condition to one of three instructional sets immediately following treatment completion: (1) The pill was described as a *sedating herb* that likely made exposure treatment easier; (2) the pill was described as a *stimulating herb* that likely made exposure treatment more difficult; or (3) the pill was described as what is really was: a *placebo* that had no effect on exposure treatment. Return of fear rates for the three conditions were 39%, 0%, and 0%, respectively. In other words, the only clients who relapse were those who were led to believe that the credit for their success in the exposure procedure was due to a pill!

The Powers et al. study confirms the importance of clients’ attributing their therapeutic improvements to their own effort, instead of to some external factor (be it a pill, “good weather” or “luck”). However, in this study attribution was influenced by a

powerful experimental manipulation. Can therapists have a similar powerful influence just by means of therapeutic conversation in their sessions? A recent study by Sara Healing and Janet Bavelas (Healing & Bavelas, 2011) suggest that this is indeed the case.

The goal of the Healing and Bavelas study was to test the effects of questions in an analogue experiment, that is, a lab experiment that used questions drawn from psychotherapy. The experimenters invited 16 subjects to complete a difficult task: they were shown for just one minute 5 color cards with complex colors and shapes, and then they had to write down an as accurate as possible a description. Then this description was given to naïve subjects (the “Matches”) who had to identify the 5 cards out of a set of 30 very similar cards. The task was difficult, so on average only 2 out of 5 cards were correctly identified. Then the experimenters used contrasting sets of questions to interview the experimental subjects (“Interviewees”) about the difficult task they had just done. They borrowed from Jenkins’ (1990) work on violence his contrast between *questions that focus on personal agency* and *questions that focus on external causes*, and created two contrasting interviews. The interview questions focused either on the difficulties of the task itself (external causes, for instance, “What effect did the time constraints have on your ability to provide adequate descriptions of the cards to your partner?”) or on what the subject had done or could have done (personal agency, for instance, “When you were studying the cards, did you manage your time efficiently?”). 8 subjects received one interview, 8 the other. After the interview, the Interviewee wrote down, in his or her own words, the factors responsible for the (bad) task score. The following week, the Interviewees did the task again and got a new score.

The research question was whether interviews on the same topic but with a different focus could affect the interviewees and produce different viewpoints and, as predicted, the interviewees’ spontaneous explanations of their task performance was congruent with the focus of questioning in their interview—both immediately afterward and one week later. In other words, the differences in the questions asked had a

cognitive effect that lasted at least one week. Even more interesting was the finding that different interviews had also different *behavioral effects*: when the 16 experimental subjects were invited, one week later, to repeat the experiment and write down descriptions of another five color cards, those who had received the interview focusing on personal agency did a better job –their matches were able to identify correctly significant more cards than the matches of those subjects who had been interviewed with the external causes questions! It can be assumed that the questions with a focus on personal agency increased the personal agency of the subjects, and that this lead to a better performance. This is exactly the kind of effect that strengths-based therapists try to have on their clients when they repeatedly ask how they have accomplished something!

References

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