

## CAN QUESTIONS LEAD TO CHANGE? AN ANALOGUE EXPERIMENT

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*Many non-traditional therapies treat questions as an influential therapeutic technique, but there is little research on this assumption. The goal of the present study was to test the effects of questions in an analogue experiment, that is, a lab experiment that used forms of questions drawn from psychotherapy. The experimenter used contrasting sets of questions to interview undergraduate volunteers about a difficult task they had just done. The broad research question was whether these interviews on the same topic but with a different focus could affect the interviewee, producing different viewpoints and even different behaviors. 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. Also as predicted, one kind of questioning improved task performance one week later. Clinical examples throughout illustrate the implications of this research for practice, training, and supervision.*

We share an assumption that many therapists make, which is that carefully chosen questions can create dialogues that bring about change. This article presents a lab experiment using a non-therapeutic task but aimed at testing whether, in principle, varying the focus of interview questions could lead to different perceptions and outcomes. After first reviewing our approach to communication in psychotherapy, we describe the experiment and its results, then conclude with several implications of these results for practitioners who are interested in experimenting with their own questioning.

### **Focusing on Therapeutic Communication**

Communication is the basic tool of psychotherapy. The practitioner comes into the therapy room with many cognitive and personal abilities (e.g., training, theoretical knowledge, experience, goals, plans, and a capacity for empathy), but the only way

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that any of these can affect the client is through the therapist's dialogue with the client. Therefore, a close examination of what happens in therapeutic dialogues is highly relevant to clinicians, whether they are students, practitioners, trainers, or supervisors. Our interdisciplinary group of practitioners and researchers has been examining closely the details of the communication tools that are available to therapists.

We started (Bavelas, McGee, Phillips, & Routledge, 2000) by pointing out that the rise of new approaches such as brief therapies, solution-focused models, relational therapies, therapeutic conversations, and narrative therapies has led to an alternative (or systemic) paradigm for psychotherapy. All of these approaches differ from therapies in the traditional paradigm in several ways, including two assumptions about therapeutic communication. The first assumption is that communication in therapy is not a process of neutral transmission in which packages of information or meaning are exchanged without any influence of the exchange process itself. Instead, the therapies in the alternative paradigm assume that communication is co-constructive, which means that both parties contribute to shaping the meanings that develop over the course of their dialogue.

The second assumption is that communication in psychotherapy is observable and specific. The abstract and global descriptions of communication in the traditional paradigm, such as "empathy" or "therapeutic bond," are worthy goals, but they barely hint at what a practitioner might do to achieve them. In the alternative paradigm, communication is what practitioners actually *do*. Co-construction occurs in the observable moment-by-moment actions and interactions between therapist and client. Because direct observation and especially recording of therapy sessions have become common practice, it is possible to examine the details of communication processes as they occurred (rather than through summaries or recall of what happened). Using video records, our group began to develop the method of *microanalysis* of communication in psychotherapy, which is "the close [moment-by-moment] examination of actual communication sequences" (Bavelas et al., 2000, p. 3). So far our program of research has examined several communication tools available to practitioners:

- *formulation*, which is a psycholinguistic term that includes paraphrasing or reflecting (De Jong, Bavelas, & Korman, 2011; Korman, Bavelas, & De Jong, 2011; Phillips, 1998, 1999)
- *positive versus negative content* (Smock, Froerer, & Bavelas, 2011; Tomori, 2004; Tomori & Bavelas, 2007)
- *questions* (McGee, 1999; McGee, Del Vento, & Bavelas, 2005; Tomori, 2004; Tomori & Bavelas, 2007)

## Questions

Questions stand out in any discussion of therapeutic dialogues because so many innovative therapists in the alternative paradigm have elevated questions from mundane

information-gathering tools to an important therapeutic technique: for example, de Shazer (1994); de Shazer, Berg, Lipchik, Nunnally, Molnar, Gingerich, and Weiner-Davis (1986); Epston and White (1992); Haley (1976); Jenkins (1990); Selvini-Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin, and Prata (1980); Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch (1974); White (1991). The therapeutic questions that these authors propose are quite different from each other, but virtually all of them assume that *the focus of the question itself affects the client and can shift the dialogue in a particular direction*. Through the client's answer and the ensuing interaction, the client and therapist may co-construct a different view of the client's situation and even the possibility of behavioral change. Strikingly, there has been virtually no research that tested this shared assumption. The purpose of this article and the experiment it reports is to start to gather evidence for this assumption and to do so in ways that would inform clinical work.

Why would the focus of a question make a difference? McGee (1999; McGee, Del Vento, & Bavelas, 2005) drew on psycholinguistic research and proposed an integrated theory for how questions work in psychotherapy. In his detailed model of the moment-by-moment relationship between question and answer, McGee illustrated how the wording of a question can focus the client and the therapeutic conversation in a particular direction (not incidentally, this is usually a direction consistent with the therapist's theoretical preferences). McGee's model has two central proposals: First, therapists' questions always contain *implicit presuppositions*, which are unstated but logically implied assumptions. For example, the question "What made you do it?" presupposes that something made the client do it; that is, external or non-volitional factors may have determined his or her action. In contrast, asking "What could you have done differently?" presupposes that the client could have done differently; that is, he or she has the ability to choose alternative actions.

McGee's (1999; McGee et al., 2005) second proposal is that questions are interactional. The implicit presuppositions in a question have an interactional effect on the client and the course of the conversation. The presuppositions focus the client in a particular direction, and by answering the question, the client implicitly accepts its presuppositions and cooperates in exploring its direction. Thus, the question "What made you do it?" will tend to lead the client to search for and talk about the particular non-volitional factors that may have led to his or her actions. The question "What could you have done differently?" will tend to lead the client to look for and examine the alternative actions he or she might have taken. The following pairs are examples of other ways that questions around the same topic can have contrasting presuppositions. It may be interesting for the reader to imagine how each member of the pair would focus the client in a different direction and could lead to a different conversation:

- "What are the problems that brought you here today?" versus "What would have to happen here today for you to say later that it was worth coming?"
- "How often do you have this problem?" versus "When is the problem not bothering you?"

- “*You have certainly been having a terrible time. What concerns you the most?*” versus “*You have certainly been having a terrible time. How did you still manage to get here today?*”

McGee (1999) illustrated his model with numerous examples taken from published therapy sessions and demonstrated that there are differences between the presuppositions of questions asked in traditional forms of psychotherapy and questions from therapies in the alternative paradigm. He emphasized that all questions have presuppositions and are co-constructive, so the practitioner’s choice is *how* (and not whether) to ask questions that co-construct their conversations in a particular way.

## THE EXPERIMENT

Still, there was no clear evidence for the proposed interactional effects of questions on the person answering them, so we took the following research question into the lab: In a non-therapeutic context, do *interview questions with a different focus on the same topic affect the Interviewee, producing different viewpoints and even different behaviours?*

### Choosing Questions

To be useful, the experiment should involve questions that are analogous to ones that might be asked in therapy. However, the best experimental design would use interview questions that differed on one clear presupposition. The latter criterion eliminated complex questions such as circular questioning (Selvini-Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin, & Prata, 1980) or miracle questioning (De Jong & Berg, 2008), at least for a first experiment such as this.

Although perhaps less well known, the questions in Jenkins’s “Invitations to Responsibility” (1990) offered a good possibility. Jenkins has developed an interesting and unique form of narrative practice addressed to male violence, and his interviews are almost entirely questions with a single major presupposition. The basic presupposition of his questions is that the client is responsible for his actions, e.g., “*What warning signs would you pick up in yourself?*” (p. 97) or “*Could you handle a marriage in which you control your violence?*” (p. 88). Jenkins rejects any questions that presuppose an external cause of the client’s actions, such as asking about the client’s own childhood abuse, his wife’s actions, his uncontrollable temper, etc. (1990, Part 1). Like other therapists in the alternative paradigm, Jenkins assumes that this method of questioning will lead to change. In his theory, the change should be in the client’s view of his own personal responsibility, which should lead to behavioural change. However, we were not testing Jenkins’s (or anyone’s) theory of therapy outcomes. Nor were we valuing one kind of question over the other. It was his contrast between questions that differ in a single major

presupposition that made possible a straightforward experimental design using questions analogous to therapy questions.

### **Designing the Experiment**

So we borrowed from Jenkins (1990) his contrast between questions that focused on *personal agency* with questions that focused on *external causes*. (See Table 1 for examples.) These two kinds of questions created two contrasting interviews with ordinary undergraduate volunteers, talking about a topic that had nothing to do with male violence or any other therapy topic. The purpose was to test the broader principle that questions differing in their presuppositions can affect the person answering them.

The next step was to translate our purpose into procedures, which consisted of the following main features: The experimenter interviewed a participant about a difficult task that he or she had just done. The interview questions focused either on the difficulties of the task itself (external causes) or on what the Interviewee had done or could have done (personal agency). Both of these questions were appropriate for the task they had done. That is, the task was difficult because of several situational constraints, but it was also true that individual actions could make a difference, so there were accurate answers to both kinds of questions. After the interview, the Interviewee wrote down, in his or her own words, the factors responsible for the task score. The following week, the Interviewees did the task again and got a new score. The next section describes the full procedure sequentially in narrative form.

### **The Experimental Procedure**

We scheduled two people to arrive for each session of the experiment. One of them (the Interviewee) was the primary participant, the one who was going to be interviewed. The other person (the Matcher) had a secondary role, described below. (For ease of presentation, the Interviewee will always be “he” or “him” and the Matcher will always be “she” or “her.” In fact, there were males and females in both roles; the experimenter was the first author.)

When the Interviewee arrived and was seated at a table, the experimenter read him the following instructions and answered any questions:

You will be shown five cards and will have one minute to study them. Then write a description of the five cards on the lines below. Your written description will be given to your partner [the Matcher], and your partner will be asked to use your description to pick these five cards out of a larger array of cards. The quality of your description will directly affect your partner’s success in correctly identifying these five cards.

When the Interviewee was ready, the experimenter presented the five cards and started the stopwatch. Each card had a different complex pattern of shapes and co-

**Table 1. Pairs of Contrasting Interview Questions and Their Presuppositions**

Interview	Question	What is the contrasting presupposition in the question?	What does this question focus the Interviewee on?
<i>Personal Agency</i>	“How successful were you at providing adequate descriptions to your partner?”	The Interviewee may or may not have been successful at providing adequate descriptions to his partner.	The Interviewee must focus on searching for what he did that was successful or not successful.
<i>External Causes</i>	“What kept you from succeeding at the task?”	Something kept the Interviewee from succeeding at the task.	The Interviewee must focus on searching for something that kept him from succeeding at the task.
<i>Personal Agency</i>	“When you were studying the cards, did you manage your time efficiently?”	The Interviewee may or may not have managed his time efficiently when he was studying the cards.	The Interviewee must focus on how he managed his time when studying the cards and then evaluate whether or not he used his time efficiently.
<i>External Causes</i>	“What effect did the time constraints have on your ability to provide adequate descriptions to your partner?”	The time constraints had some effect on the Interviewee’s ability to provide adequate descriptions.	The Interviewee must focus on what happened when he did the task and then think about what effect the time constraints had on his ability to provide adequate descriptions.
<i>Personal Agency</i>	“What could you have done differently in order to improve on this task?”	The Interviewee could have done something differently in this task that would have improved his score.	The Interviewee must focus on what he did in the task and then search for alternatives that would lead to improvement.
<i>External Causes</i>	“What sorts of things in the task would have to be changed in order for you to do well?”	Things in the task would have to be changed in order for the Interviewee to do well on the task.	The Interviewee must focus on the things in the task that kept him from doing well and then consider how they would have to be changed in order for him to do well.

lours; they were all difficult to describe. After one minute, the experimenter turned the cards face down and asked the Interviewee to start writing a description of the five cards from memory. He had as much time as he needed to write his description.

When the Interviewee was finished, the experimenter invited the Matcher to come in. The Matcher sat at a different table with a set of 30 cards. The Matcher's set shared many color and shape features with the correct cards, but only five of the cards actually matched. The experimenter gave the Interviewee's written description of the five cards to the Matcher and asked her to use this description to locate the correct five cards from the array of 30 cards. The Matcher had as much time as she needed to find the five cards. The Interviewee and the experimenter were present but did not interact with the Matcher.

When the Matcher was satisfied with the five cards she had selected, the experimenter counted the number of cards the Matcher had identified correctly and announced the score out of a possible five. The task was difficult by design, and the scores averaged about 2 in this first session. For the Interviewee, the difficulties included the short viewing time, having to rely on his memory, the complex card designs that were hard to describe, and having to write something for a stranger of unknown ability and motivation. For the Matcher, the difficulties included the numerous similarities among the 30 cards and having to rely solely on a written description. After learning the score, the Matcher then left the room and her part in the experiment was over.

The experimenter then conducted a semi-structured interview for 5 to 10 minutes, using open-ended questions about the task and the score. The experimenter alternated the focus of the interview across the Interviewees, so half of them had questions focused on personal agency, and the other half had questions focused on external causes. Table 1 shows several examples of the questions from each kind of interview. As expected, the Interviewees' answers usually cooperated with the presupposition in the questions and answered in a way that implied either personal agency (e.g., "*Instead, I could have made sure I spent equal time on each card, instead of too much time on one or two of them*") or, in the other interview, they answered in a way that implied external causes (e.g., "*The time limit was the biggest problem, it just wasn't enough to do a better job*"). The experimenter followed up each answer by asking for more details or more examples. It was unusual for the Interviewee's response to fit the other presupposition, for example, describing external causes in the personal-agency interview. If that occurred, the experimenter acknowledged the answer and moved on to another question with the assigned presupposition. If the Interviewee's answer contained both kinds of information, then the experimenter followed up on the part relevant to the focus of the interview and ignored the other part.

After the interview, the Interviewee described his own attributions about his performance. He received a form with a single open-ended question: "*What factors are responsible for the number of cards incorrectly identified or not identified at all by your partner?*" and wrote his answers on the otherwise blank sheet.

Recall that the task was difficult for both personal and external reasons, and the phrasing on this form did not suggest one factor more than the other. Although the interview had focused on one factor, the Interviewee had experienced both possibilities and was now free to list either or both of them. When he was done, the experimenter thanked him and confirmed that he had agreed to come back the following week.

The Matcher's role in the experiment was over after doing the matching task, so when the Interviewee had left, the experimenter explained the experiment as a whole, answered her questions, and thanked her.

One week later, the Interviewee returned as previously arranged. A new Matcher was also there, waiting outside. The experimenter started by giving the Interviewee a form almost identical to the one from the previous week. The single question was

Last week your partner was unable to identify \_ of 5 cards based on the description you provided. Please list below what factors were responsible for the cards incorrectly identified or not identified at all by your partner.

After the Interviewee had finished writing his answers, the experimenter informed the Interviewee that he was going to do the same task as the week before, but with a new Matcher and a new set of five cards. The experimenter reviewed the instructions, gave the Interviewee one minute to study the new set of cards, and then the Interviewee wrote a description of these cards for the new Matcher. When the Interviewee had finished, the experimenter invited the new Matcher in, and she used the Interviewee's description to choose the five cards from the same set of 30 cards. When the experimenter had recorded their score out of five, the experiment was over. The experimenter explained the full experiment to both of them, answered their questions, and thanked them.

Altogether, there were 48 participants: 16 Interviewees, with 8 in each kind of interview, and 32 Matchers (16 the first week and 16 the second week).

## Analysis

The task scores required no analysis. The Matcher's success was an objective measure of the quality of the Interviewee's descriptions. One advantage of having a task score that was generated directly between the Interviewee and the Matcher was that it did not involve any judgment by the researchers. Individual variations in the Matchers' ability and motivation might affect the scores, but these random variations would be the same for both interview conditions.

The Interviewees' open-ended answers on the two written forms after their interviews required analysis. It was necessary to identify each factor that the Interviewee listed either as one that attributed the task score to personal agency or as one that attributed the task score to external factors. Attributions of personal agency were those that named the Interviewee as the agent of some action, including an indication that he was responsible for the action; for example,

- The descriptions I gave matched more than one card.
- My descriptions were vague.

In contrast, attributions to external causes were those that implicated situational constraints or other factors outside the Interviewee's control; for example,

- Lack of time to study the cards.
- Lack of knowledge of the rest of the cards that my partner would see.

Two analysts independently examined all of the factors named in six of the forms, with 97% agreement on them. This high inter-analyst reliability confirmed that the analysis was straightforward, so the first author analyzed the remaining forms.

### **Predictions and Specific Research Questions**

We had two measures of the effects of the interviews: The Interviewee's written attributions after their interviews would reveal how they perceived the task and their role in it, and the task scores in the second week would reveal any subsequent behavioral changes. There were specific sets of predictions for each measure.

First, the nature of the interview questions (presupposing personal agency versus external causes) should affect the Interviewees' later attributions in their answers to the question about the factors responsible for the score. As described above, both factors operated in this task, so it would be accurate for the Interviewees to refer to either or both. The difference was that their interview had created a dialogue about one factor rather than the other. Therefore, we predicted that the individuals who had answered interview questions about external causes would subsequently use the written form to attribute their scores more often to external causes, such as the various task difficulties, than to their own actions. The reverse should be true for those who answered questions about personal agency. We also predicted that the effect of the interview on the Interviewees' attributions about the first week's score would still be present a week later, even though the interview would have faded into the background and the Interviewees were free to recall or think about any other factors. In summary, this reasoning led to three specific research questions:

1. In the first week, would *attributions of personal agency* be more frequent in the written descriptions by Interviewees who had the personal-agency interview than in the descriptions written by Interviewees who had the external-causes interview?
2. In the first week, would *attributions of external causes* be more frequent in the written descriptions of Interviewees who had the external-causes interview than in the descriptions written by Interviewees who had the personal-agency interview?
3. One week later, would these two differences still be found?

The second set of predictions were that questions about personal agency would improve their second task score more than questions about external causes. It is important to point out that this prediction and the reasons for it are highly task-specific and not a general endorsement of personal-agency questioning in all contexts: there was nothing the Interviewees could do to change the external features of their task, so focusing on those details would not help them to do better. However, there were several possible strategies that they could use, some better than others, so the Interviewees who examined their own actions in the interview could possibly find a way to improve. Therefore, there were two further research questions:

4. Would the scores in the personal-agency group *improve* significantly from the first to the second week?
5. Would the scores in the external-causes group *not improve* significantly from the first to the second week?

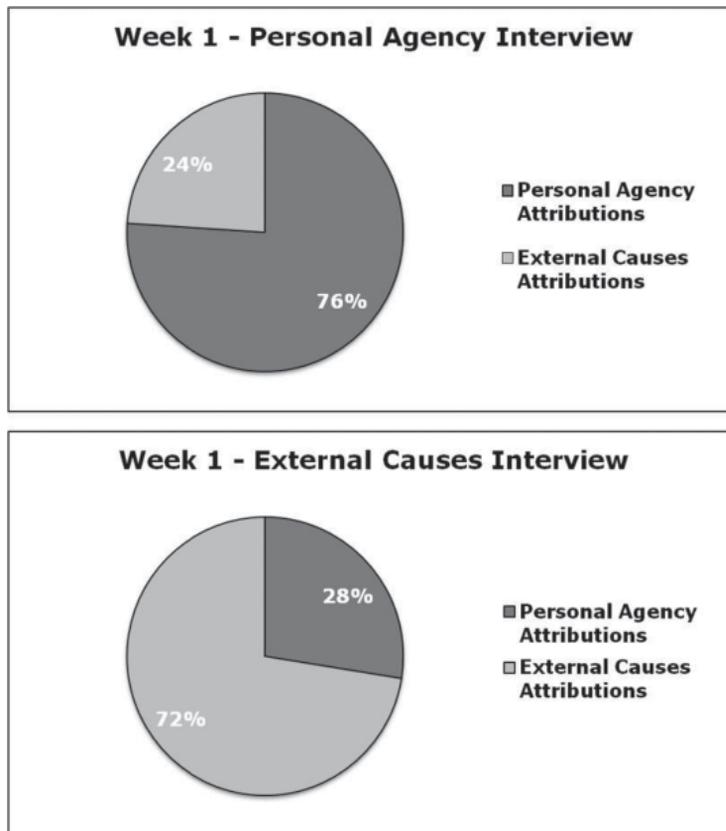
## RESULTS

*Attributions, week 1.* Figure 1 shows the results for the first two research questions: As predicted, the attributions that the Interviewees spontaneously offered as responsible for their task scores were overwhelmingly congruent with the focus of their interview. Those who were in the personal-agency interview attributed their task scores to personal agency about three times as often as they attributed it to external causes. The Interviewees in the external-causes interview did the reverse, attributing their task scores to external causes about three times as often as they attributed it to personal agency. The differences between the two conditions for both kinds of attributions were statistically significant (see Table 2).

*Attributions, week 2.* Figure 2 shows that these differences were still present, to a lesser degree, one week after the interview. The Interviewees who had answered questions about personal agency again made significantly more personal-agency attributions than did the Interviewees who had answered questions about external causes. There was also a difference in their attributions to external causes, but this difference was small and no longer statistically significant. (See Table 2 for both results.) Notice that the attributions of Interviewees from the personal-agency interview showed the same 3:1 proportion between the two kinds of attributions from week 1 to week 2. However, the Interviewees who had the external-causes interview increased the proportion of their personal-agency attributions relative to those about external causes. It is pure speculation, but this study was conducted at the end of the academic term, as final exam time approached—a time when students are increasingly aware of the importance of their own personal agency in overcoming any external factors. This might be the reason that the previously low level of personal-agency attributions increased.

*Improvement in task scores.* Figure 3 summarizes the effects of the interviews

**FIGURE 1.** The Interviewees' attributions about the factors responsible for their task performance, written immediately after their interview. The percentages combine all of the answers from Interviewees who had the same kind of interview.



on the task scores in week 2. The two darker bars are the scores for the first week, before the interviews, and these confirm that the two groups started at the same level. The lighter bars for each interview group show the improvement in week 2. Both groups improved, probably because the Interviewees had now seen the 30 cards that the Matchers would choose from. Still, an examination of the week 1 versus week 2 scores for each interview group suggests that the personal-agency interviews led to more improvement than did the external-causes interviews. The appropriate statistical tests confirmed that, as predicted, the scores one week after

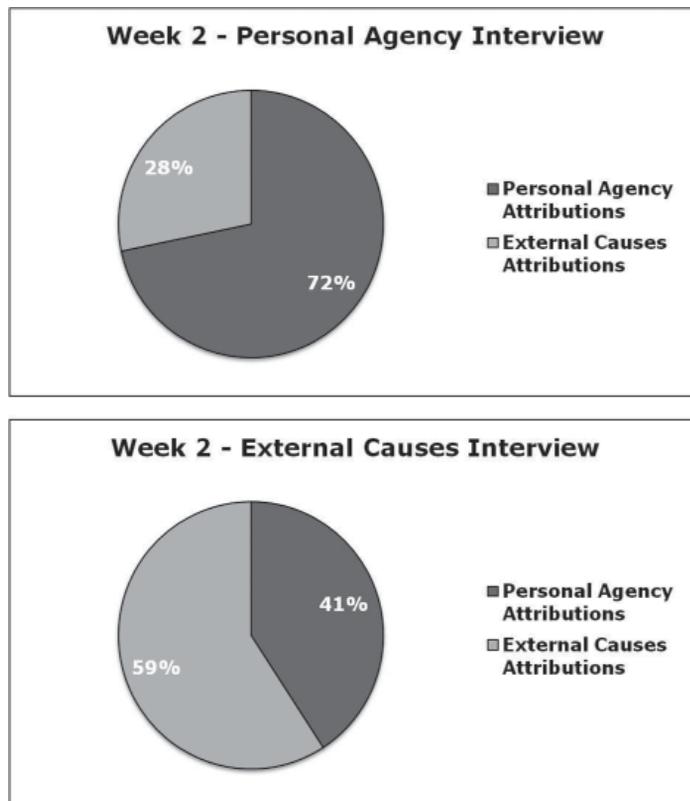
**TABLE 2. Interviewees' Attributions of Factors Responsible for Task Scores after Interviews Focused on Personal Agency versus External Causes**

Week	Measure	Focus of Interview Questions		<i>t</i> -tests*
		Personal Agency	External Causes	
1	Personal agency attributions	2.34 (.92) <sup>a</sup>	1.00 (.93)	$t(14) = 2.99, p < .005$
1	External cause attributions	.75 (1.17)	2.63 (1.51)	$t(14) = -2.79, p < .008$
2	Personal agency attributions	2.38 (.92)	1.38 (.92)	$t(14) = 2.18, p < .03$
2	External cause attributions	.88 (1.13)	2.00 (1.51)	$t(14) = -1.69, p = .057$

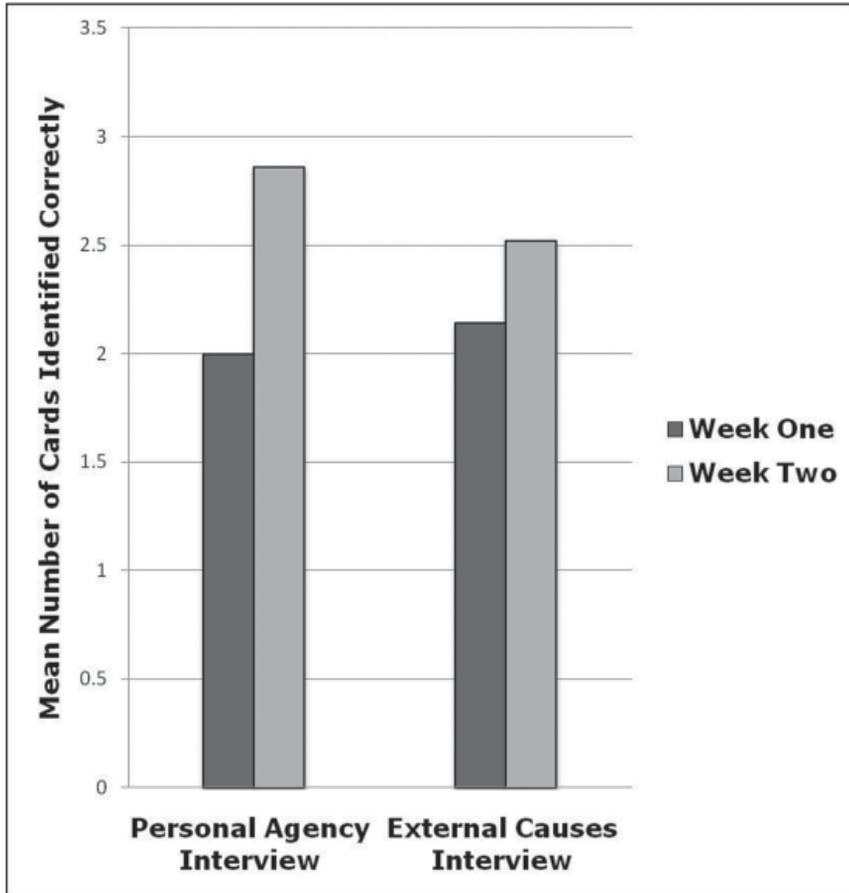
<sup>a</sup>Means with standard deviations in parentheses

\*One-tailed, between-groups *t*-tests

**FIGURE 2. The Interviewees' attributions about the factors responsible for their task performance, written immediately after their interview. The percentages combine all of the answers from Interviewees who had the same kind of interview.**



**FIGURE 3.** Task scores for both interview conditions in week 1 and week 2. The first pair of bars (on the left) are the scores before and after the interview that focused on personal agency. The second pair (on the right) are the scores before and after the interview that focused on external causes.



the personal-agency interviews were significantly higher than the scores before the interview. Also as predicted, the scores after the external-causes interview did not show significant improvement. (See Table 3.)

## DISCUSSION

Different questions in the two interviews led the interviewees to make significantly different attributions about the factors responsible for their task scores, both after the interview and one week later. In addition, questioning that focused on personal

**TABLE 3. Task Scores before and after Interviews Focused on Personal Agency versus External Causes**

Week	Measure	Focus of Interview Questions	
		Personal Agency	External Causes
1	Task Score (out of 5)	2.00 (1.00) <sup>a</sup>	2.14 (1.07)
2	Task Score (out of 5)	2.86 (1.07)	2.52 (.79)
1 vs 2	Improvement	+.86*	+.38**

<sup>a</sup>Means with standard deviations in parentheses

\* $t(7) = 2.52, p < .002$ , paired samples, one-tailed

\*\* $t(7) = .89$ , n.s., paired samples, one-tailed

agency led to an improvement in task scores one week later, presumably because the Interviewee was providing better descriptions for the Matcher to use. The answers to the research questions were all as predicted, and all but one of these differences were statistically significant.

A broader goal of this research was to determine whether it was possible to obtain experimental evidence that is relevant to understanding therapeutic communication processes, that is, to build a bridge between the lab and the therapy room. This controlled experiment confirmed that interview questions on the same topic but with a different focus can affect the Interviewee, producing different attributions and even different behaviors. These results suggest that future research on what happens *between* questions and their effects would be of interest and even useful. For us, another benefit of the experiment was the process of constructing and asking the contrasting questions. As shown in Table 1, in order to create questions that varied in a single primary presupposition, it was necessary to systematically analyze the specific features that make questions different. A similar analysis of alternative forms of questions on a given topic could be useful for choosing questions in actual therapy sessions or presenting contrasts in training.

Although our sample size was relatively small, the significant results are consistent with the limited experimental findings on questions. For example, Loftus and Palmer's (1974) lab experiment found that the wording of a question significantly influenced how a person later recalled an event. Clark and Schober's (1992) review of the survey literature revealed many ways in which the wording of survey questions significantly affected the answers provided. Heritage, Robinson, Elliott, Beckett, and Wilkes (2007) conducted a field experiment in which physicians asked their patients either "*Is there something else you wish to address in the visit today?*" versus "*Is there anything else you wish to address in the visit today?*" The "*something*" version elicited significantly more concerns than the "*anything*" version did. Presumably there were concerns in the latter version that went unmentioned and unmet. Recently, Richmond, Smock, Bischof, and Sauer (2011) conducted two studies that compared solution-focused and

problem-focused intake questions in psychotherapy clinics. In the first study, a written solution-focused intake form elicited significantly different information than did a traditional problem-focused form. The second study found that clients improved significantly after a solution-focused intake interview and before treatment started, which was not true after a standard DSM-based interview. Altogether, these findings and the present results support key parts of McGee's (1999; McGee et al., 2005) model of questioning. They also confirm and support the experience of the many therapists within the alternative paradigm who choose their questions carefully and mindfully.

### CONCLUSIONS: IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Beyond confirming the potency of questions, perhaps the most useful implication of this study for practitioners, trainers, and supervisors is its dissection of the questioning process. It is possible to analyze the wording of a question, first, for its presuppositions and then for the focus that these presuppositions impose on the client. Questions have a forward force, especially in a therapeutic interaction. For the client to cooperate with the question means providing certain kinds of information and not others. This information may have been available in the client's memory; however, the question may give the information a new meaning. In other cases, the client may construct new information right in the moment, in the process of answering (e.g., when answering questions about hypothetical situations that the therapist has presented). Thus, as McGee (1999; McGee et al., 2005) proposed, a question initiates a co-construction process, which the client then joins in. An example will illustrate an abbreviated version of this process:

Steve de Shazer<sup>1</sup> was conducting an initial interview with a client who reported a history of alcoholism. Several treatments, including a residential program, had worked for a while but not long-term. One questioning sequence is particularly worth examining in microanalysis, that is, in step-by-step detail:

DE SHAZER: *What about in the last few weeks? Some days have been better than others?*

CLIENT: *Some days, yes it has. Some days've been better.*

DE SHAZER: *OK, and what was the most recent good day? Without-*

CLIENT: *problems 'n . . .*

DE SHAZER: *Mhm. [long pause]*

CLIENT: *[sounding surprised] Just about every day. (de Shazer: Mhm) It's just the physical part really, that-that, you know, makes things uncomfortable for*

<sup>1</sup>This excerpt is from a session called "250,000 is enough" (de Shazer, 1994, pp. 246–271; the excerpt appears on pp. 247–248). De Shazer sent us a copy of the video for research and teaching purposes, and the transcription and analysis were made from the video.

*me when I drink. Although, you know, I- I might have problems in my life just like anybody else.*

DE SHAZER: *Oh, of course, (Client: You know) Sure.*

First, de Shazer's initial question (*What about in the last few weeks? Some days have been better than others?*) has several presuppositions: that it is possible for things to be better sometimes, that some whole days can be better, and that some days have been better in the last few weeks.

Second, the effect of a question is to constrain and orient the client to a particular aspect of his experience. To answer, he must focus on the last few weeks (not his whole life) and then look for single days (not the entire period) that fit the criterion of being "better" (i.e., not the same as others, not worse, but not necessarily perfect). The client cooperates with these constraints and answers the question directly (*"Some days, yes it has. Some days've been better."*)

Third, the answer is owned by the client, not the therapist. The therapist was "not-knowing." It was the client who provided the information, based on his own recall, evaluation, and conclusion. A question is not a unilateral intervention because, although it initiates an interactional sequence, the client's contribution completes it.

Fourth, the client's answer implicitly accepts the presuppositions that were in the question. His answer confirms that it is possible for things to be better sometimes, that some whole days can be better, and that some days have been better recently. So a great deal has already happened between the question and the answer.

Fifth, as the conversation moves ahead, what were initially only presuppositions in the therapist's question become common ground, mutually constructed between them. Thus, de Shazer can immediately ask the client "*What was the most recent good day? Without—,*" and he does not even have to finish his question; the client finishes it for him. Before answering their jointly constructed question, the client pauses, searching for the most recent "*good day—without problems.*" Then, as if he has discovered something that surprises him, he answers "*Just about every day.*" He goes on to offer opinions that present a new assessment of his current situation, and they end with overlapping confirmations of this view. The entire sequence is 29 seconds long.

Clearly, de Shazer's questions reflected his solution-focused model, seeking exceptions to the problematic history the client had initially presented. These questions deliberately presupposed that there were exceptions to the problem and aimed to bring that information into their conversation. The reader can imagine other therapists who would have asked different questions with different presuppositions, which would have focused the client in a different direction and would have elicited entirely different information. As noted above, examining or generating contrasting questions is a good way to understand their power.

We have emphasized that there is always a choice of what questions to ask and that the analysis presented here can inform this choice. However, one choice is not available: it is not possible to ask "neutral" questions without presuppositions or effects, or questions that obtain information antiseptically and without influence

on the interaction. All questions are “loaded questions”; the practitioner’s choice is how to “load” them with presuppositions that will be useful to the client.

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