

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

The Impact of Asking Intention or Self-Prediction Questions on Subsequent Behavior: A Meta-Analysis

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Asking for Change

Summary/Conclusions

Previous studies have identified that when individuals are asked questions about their behavior, there is an increased chance that individuals engage in behavior change. This process is known as the question-behavior effect (QBE). In order to determine the impact and what variables influence the effect, researchers conducted a meta-analysis of 116 recent studies of QBE. From the studies analyzed, researchers discovered that questions that made individuals predict future behaviors had the largest effect on behavior change.

Limitations of Information

The meta-analysis was focused on studies with clear observable behaviors, which were largely in laboratory settings. It is unclear if QBE is powerful outside of lab conditions. The study did not account for personal relationships or characteristics of the questioner that may influence the QBE. The meta-analysis consists of a wide variety of study participants, which may not be representative of a criminal justice population.

Caveat: The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

For more than 20 years researchers have been exploring how communication influences behavior. The question-behavior effect (QBE) has shown promise to subtly influence individuals by asking them to predict or discuss intentions regarding future behaviors. To determine the impact as well as the variables that influence the effect, researchers completed a meta-analysis on current research involving QBE.

Researchers gathered a list of all existing scholarly articles on QBE and then reviewed them for eligibility. The meta-analysis criteria was limited to studies on QBE that had a mechanism of measurement for behaviors, cited the type of question asked (e.g. prediction, intention, mixed), and included a control condition. Only studies that included sufficient statistical information to calculate effect sizes were included in the meta-analysis.

The meta-analysis confirmed that questions regarding intention and prediction of future behaviors had a positive effect on future behaviors. Having an individual predict future behaviors was more powerful than asking about an individual's future intentions. The QBE was more impactful with simple behaviors. As the behavior became more difficult to change, the influence of QBE lessened. The meta-analysis also discovered that focusing on risky or undesirable behaviors had no significant effect. Finally, studies where the QBE included incentives, the effect of QBE increased, while studies without incentives showed a smaller QBE impact.

Practical Applications:

- √ Ask probationers to predict how likely they are to make positive behavior changes (e.g. how successful will you be in the future refusing drugs and alcohol from old friends).
- √ Consider asking probationers about their intent to change simple behavior. For example, instead of asking about a probationer's intent to stay sober, ask a probationer's about their intent to leave when alcohol and drugs are present.
- √ Some behavior changes may be more or less difficult for individuals to accomplish. Ask the probationer to share their perception of how difficult it will be to change.
- √ Focus questions on the behaviors you would like to see instead of the behaviors that you do not want to continue (e.g. showing up to appointments instead of missing appointments).
- √ Use reinforcements and sanctions to encourage probationers to follow through on target behaviors.
- √ Plan in advance to ask about behaviors related to criminogenic need areas, as these areas will have the greatest impact on reduced reoffending.
- √ Ask for a peer or supervisor to observe an appointment and provide feedback on the questions you ask regarding a probationer's behaviors (see practical applications #1 and #2).