Colorado Probation Research in Brief

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


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.

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).